

# Believer, Seeker, Agnostic, Atheist, and Anti-Theist

## Who's Who and What's the Difference

**L**anguage evolves. Over time, a word will gain a meaning in popular use long before it is adopted by academics.

Several words in common use around AA create a good deal of confusion. This article defines the four most common words related to individual spiritual outlooks and proposes a new word to offer some clarity to the discussion.

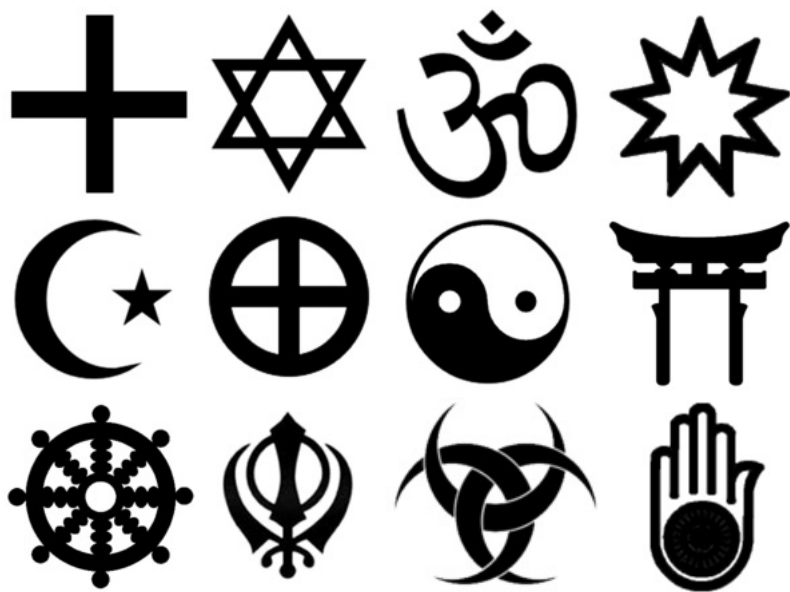
When someone who does not hold a belief attempts to explain the belief, the result is filtered through the speaker's own belief system. A Believer defining an Agnostic is much the same as a banker explaining Communism.

## Purpose

The purpose of this article is to introduce a fourth position in the area of personal belief. Atheists and Agnostics have too often been described by believers, and are sometimes perceived as arrogant and condescending. Believers have been described by anti-theists, which could be called the arrogant describing the blind. All confuse their own positions with what should be true for others. This mistake ignores the fact that the very personal failures that brought us into recovery, and most of our other failures as well, have been the result of our brain and its judgments. We are tempted to re-define others within our own terms and then respond to what is actually our own internal creation - instead of simply dealing with the other person where he or she is.

Our growth is dependent on a belief in "a power greater than ourselves." This belief evolved in 12-Step groups beyond the initial religious limitations of the Protestant and primarily male Christian group where

it began. When the focus was changed from the Christian God to "a Higher Power," it became possible for newcomers to address their immediate challenge – alcoholism, drugs, behaviors, etc. – without having to jump through the hoop created by the be-



*Symbols of some recognized religions from Wikipedia.org.  
Members in Recovery may have one or none of the above, or a blend  
according to their personal understanding of a "Higher Powers".*

lief that “You must start where I have arrived after much work” of those with longer recovery. It made it possible for newcomers without a religious background to partake of the blessings of recovery without any additional requirements imposed by religious dogma.

Recovery is often not a return to a previous state, but delivery to a completely new experience of being part of a greater reality, a larger community, and the embrace of a non-physical reality we all share.

When I speak of “non-physical” reality, it is an attempt to frame all five of these positions with the context of emotion, compassion, and the expression of our highest natures. Love is irrational, but love is experienced. The compassion and impulse of an individual to charge into a burning building to save a stranger, at the risk of his or her own survival, is irrational. To some extent, the willingness to sacrifice for our own children actually works against personal benefit and sometimes our very survival.

But all of these are real, despite the lack of rational motive.

The “Higher Power” is open to personal interpretation. Believers tend to pre-determine that it must mean a deity or separate intelligence and define all other views from that viewpoint. Agnostics tend to pre-determine that any teachings or discussion can only arrive at the point where the Mystery outweighs the beliefs of the teaching. The atheist maintains that it can all be accepted without a defined intelligence above the human level and that any human attempt to describe that reality must fail to provide a complete comprehension. The most strident anti-theist would be hard pressed to argue that they are greater than a hurricane or a wild fire, but hold that all actions and processes must be subject to rational analysis. The seeker keeps looking for the answers and may or may not arrive at one of the other positions.

Each is ultimately doomed to frustration when they have not made someone else conform to their own position within the continuum of faith.

## **Believer**

This word is commonly understood to mean anyone who subscribes to a set of beliefs. This can involve any of the world’s religions or a newly-devised faith. The key is the commitment of the individual to a defined belief system and its attendant rituals, doctrines, and practices.

At the core of the believer is a conviction in a defined deity or god (by whatever name) and the traditions, scripture, and practices of a specific religion.

People involved in a formal religious life – Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, etc. – are classified as believers.

## **Seeker**

A seeker is someone who has not yet settled on a specific set of beliefs, but who does have faith that there is a belief appropriate for them. Seekers tend to try a variety of existing beliefs and conduct research to locate a system in which they can believe. Such beliefs may not be part of a specific or recognized religion, faith, holy text, or doctrine. It can be a personal mix of beliefs that are expanded or reduced as the seeker sees fit.

Many seekers continue to search for new ideas after they appear to have settled on a given set of beliefs, and some even cycle continuously from one belief system to another.

## **Agnostic**

The word ‘agnostic’ creates confusion because it is usually defined by someone other than the agnostic himself. The definition that commonly arises in such cases is more properly applied to the seeker.

The word is based on the Greek “gnosis” (NOS-iss) which means “knowledge”. In the Greek language, the prefix a- before a word adds the meaning “without”. “Agnostic” (AG-noss-tick) thus means “without knowledge.”

Most Agnostics will tell you that they believe the reality of “god” of whatever definition is beyond the ability of the human mind to comprehend. Sayings like “any God small enough for me to understand is not big enough to do the job” or “I cannot hold the ocean of god in my teacup of a brain” are sometimes used to explain their thought system.

Agnostics are content to function based on codes, behaviors, practices, and customs that do not involve a deity while also not necessarily ruling out the existence of one.

## **Atheist**

The word “atheist” is derived from the Greek word “Theos,” meaning “deity” or “god,” and serving as the foundation of words like “theology” (the study of religion). “Atheist” therefore means “without a deity” or “without God”.

Technically, an atheist believes there is no deity to be worshiped. Most scientists or people believe science’s explanations would qualify as atheist, although many hold sets of beliefs (are believers) without seeing conflicts between religious doctrine and scientific theory.

The Buddhist religion can be considered both Agnostic and Atheist; it is not a religion in the believer’s sense discussed earlier. It is more an ‘approach’ or philosophy to a spiritual life. You can find devout members of several formal religions who also maintain various Buddhist practices, such as Buddhist and Christian, Buddhist and Shinto, Buddhist and Confucian. People can subscribe to set of practices, morals, and beliefs - with or without a supreme

deity - according to their personal practice.

More confusion can be created because Buddhism is very flexible and does not disbelieve other faiths - – Buddhism has retained local belief systems (demons, goddesses, etc.) while adapting to new cultures which causes outside observers to think that Buddhism in Europe or North America hold the same belief of these deities held by Buddhists in Nepal or Southeast Asia. This is not necessarily the case.

## **Anti-Theist**

This is not a recognized word and is being proposed to define an observable set of beliefs. With the Greek base “theos” and the prefix “anti-” meaning “against” or “in opposition to”, this new word is intended to mean a belief that not only maintains there is no deity or god, but actively opposes or works against the belief in such a deity by others.

Anti-theism is sometimes referred to as “Militant Atheism” in the press and has become the most publicly known face of atheists, particularly the branch known as the “New Atheists.” Anti-Theists often adopt the same intolerant attitudes as militant believers, seeking to change the personal beliefs of others to conform to what they believe.

Anti-Theist, as a word, is proposed to separate the personal non-deity belief system from the more strident approach of controlling the personal beliefs of others.

Even the most virulent anti-theist can proceed in recovery by simply admitting to the rational fact that there are forces greater than himself or herself. They do not walk out during the hurricane to tell it to stop; they do not run under the falling tree to prove they are more powerful. Rational thought can place them in their proper place in natural existence, even without acknowledging any sort of supernatural “intelligence”.

## Surrendering the True-False God

The real purpose of this essay is to open up the concept of Willing Submission – to remove our Brain as the object of worship. People take thoughts emerging from their own brains as divine revelation, regardless of the amount of evidence of the failure of that brain to come up with a simple plan for successful daily living.

People express their belief in the Brain with daily language and attitudes related to intelligence, their own or someone else's. "He's so smart..."; "She's a genius..."; or "They're dumber than a bag of hammers..."; are some examples. All are said with a level of emotional attachment to the value of a "good brain" or the deficit of a "small brain".

But many of the greatest brains have been unable to live successfully, whether they turned to addictive substances or behavior or not. Many intelligent people that enter Recovery 'think' their way back into the bars and behaviors that defeated them.

And many "stupid" people have simply done what the steps and the Big Book say, end their relationship with their addiction, and begin to live functional, reasonably happy lives.

The concept of Willing Submission is common to all of the major faiths. You submit to the Deity, the doctrine, the teachings, the morals, or other definition of how a person should live in their daily life. The word "Islam" translates as "the Surrender". Buddhism requires a surrender of the Ego to end suffering. Christianity teaches submission and obedience to the manifestations

of authority inherent to that particular belief system – the church, Bible, pastor, teacher, husband, etc.

Willing Submission creates the possibility of living without giving in to lusts, cravings, desires, and distortion. No one performs perfect submission, but the effort to attain that state provides a foundation for better, more responsible behavior.

A Believer or Agnostic may follow the required submission to the code of behaviors dictated by their faith, seeing them as Divine Law or requirements of the faith. An atheist or anti-theist may admit they live under the "Laws of Nature" or the "Laws of Physics" and it will be sufficient to move them forward in Recovery.

Determine the definition of your own Spirituality, your relationship to the non-physical realities of love, emotion, and compassion. Follow the dictates of the moral code to which you subscribe, whether you feel they are divinely commanded or rationally extracted. Take the time to express your truth – your fear or appreciation or desire for direction – and it will not matter if you call it "Prayer" or "Deep Thought". Sit quietly and experience calm and it does not matter if you call it "Meditation" or "Contemplation".

It need matter only to you, and you can allow others to wrestle with the question of where they fit in the continuum of spiritual reality. Each must accept that their own mighty brain is not the object of worship but that the reality of the world as an expression of God's Creation or Natural Forces is greater than our limited Brain will ever fully comprehend.

